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ABSTRACT

It is proposed that there are three common misconceptions and criticisms held by the general public concerning Canadian universities: (1) the view that universities are hotbeds of radicalism, alcoholism, and sexism, (2) that there is a decline in the quality of work produced by universities and in their academic standards, and (3) that universities lack responsiveness to Canada's needs for economic growth and international competitiveness. Alcoholism and sexism are acknowledged as problems but the processes designed to solve them are already well underway, some of which include alcohol awareness programs; peer counseling; creating equal opportunities for advancement within some colleges; and development of various enlightened policies on sexual harassment. The decline in quality can be seen as a result of declining financial support from benefactors, both institutional and personal. Universities have made remarkable adjustments, however, in order to respond to this financial vacuum even while enrollment is increasing. Evidence has shown that greater selectivity of incoming freshmen along with aggressive resource management and program development has produced students of equal calibre to the rest of the world in numerous areas of academic importance. Many of these areas address Canada's needs economically, socially, and in international competitiveness. (GLR)

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ARE UNIVERSITIES REALLY OUT OF TOUCH?

by

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Presented to the Rotary Club of Ottawa

Ottawa, Ontario

March 26, 1990

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ARE UNIVERSITIES REALLY OUT OF TOUCH?*

I'm delighted with this opportunity to be your speaker today; in fact, I consider it a real honour to be invited to speak to my fellow Rotarians at such an early point in my tenure as a member of this Club (as you can see from my name badge, I'm still a red-striper). It occurred to me that this might be some kind of initiation rite and that if I blow it you'll drum me out of the Club. Let me assure you, however, that I have no interest in being drummed out of this Club; I was a Rotarian in Winnipeg for eight years and, even though I am unable to contribute as much to it as I would like to and as I know I should, I nevertheless consider it a privilege to be joined with you in this important movement. And so I'll do my best to convince you that you didn't make a mistake in admitting me to membership here.

When I was invited to speak today, I was given no suggestion as to topic. This kind of freedom is a speaker's delight and, for a fellow Rotarian, it provides an irresistible opportunity to sneak in a craft talk. I do not, however, want to be too parochial; and so I'm going to talk about Canadian universities in general, although I hope I may be forgiven for drawing largely upon our experience at Carleton when I need to illustrate my points. While I wasn't given a topic, I was asked

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*The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance, in preparing this presentation, of Mark Giberson, Manager of Media and Community Relations, Carleton University.

for a title and, as you've seen, I have chosen the question: "Are universities really out of touch?" You can undoubtedly anticipate my answer to that question, but you'll have to wait a few minutes for it - if you can stand the suspense.

I assume that whatever interest there was in my being the speaker today arose from the fact that I am new to Ottawa and have responsibility for one of the major institutions in our community, and someone thought that it might be worthwhile to find out what I think about this place and what's developing at that institution. If this isn't what you wanted I should apologize now, because that's what you're going to get.

First, you should know that I've fallen in love with Ottawa. The beauty of this city and its environs continues to astound me. And I truly believe that it's a privilege for any Canadian to have the opportunity to live and work here (and to cash in on some of the tax money that we westerners have been investing in the nation's capital over the years). Ottawa seems to have more than its share of detractors, and I think it's unfortunate that their quarrel with "the official Ottawa" has the effect of colouring people's perception of what lies beyond the Parliamentary precinct. I have discovered here a city enriched by cultural diversity, a city that recognizes the importance of preserving its history, its traditional neighbourhoods and its

green spaces; I've discovered a city which sees itself in terms much larger than one normally associates with a seat of government.

But because Ottawa is the nation's capital, it offers those who live and work here a wealth of special opportunities they can find nowhere else. For those of us who work at the University, it means we have easy access to Federal Government departments and agencies and to the Diplomatic Corps. That's a boon to our students and faculty in fields such as Political Science, Canadian Studies, International Affairs, Area Studies, Public Administration, and Modern Languages. Also we have easy access to the broad range of national institutions, major research councils, and national and international associations that are headquartered here. That's an advantage for our people in the fields of Journalism, Women's Studies, Economics and Trade, Labour Studies, Art History, and Heritage Conservation. And because Ottawa is also Canada's high technology capital, our people in Engineering, Computer Science, and Business have opportunities to draw upon outside expertise and to work on new relationships aimed at technology transfer, joint ventures, and market development.

Ottawa is also a leading educational and research centre. This presents our people at Carleton with opportunities

to work closely with their counterparts in another one of Canada's major universities. We're doing some exciting things with the University of Ottawa - combining our resources with theirs and taking full advantage of the expertise that's found on both of our campuses. We offer jointly our graduate programs in Science, Engineering, and Economics; and students at either university are free to take courses from the other without additional cost or trouble. In the several areas where we have established joint programs, we rank either first or second nationally in size and strength and we have thus constituted world-class centres of excellence. We are constantly looking for new avenues of possible co-operation and, in addition, at Carleton we are seeking to establish some joint programs with the University of Quebec at Hull and with Algonquin College as well. Together, the institutions of higher education in the Ottawa-Hull area contribute about three-quarters of a billion dollars to the local economy each year - a very substantial economic impact on our community that would not exist if we weren't here. That kind of benefit from post-secondary education is enjoyed by precious few cities in this country, and certainly by none that are of the modest size and liveable scale that we enjoy here.

So you're lucky to have us. But by the same token I am certain that there is no better place to be for someone who's in the business of trying to run a university. I'm tremendously

proud of what's happening on our campus and I want to share that pride with you by telling you some of the things that I've discovered about Carleton. In doing this, I also want to talk about perceptions, because we're finding that it is not enough to be doing worthwhile and important things - we must also be <u>seen</u> to be doing those things by people like you. I said a moment ago that Ottawa appears to have more than its share of detractors, that the impression they leave with the public doesn't really reflect reality, and that this city is more than the one-dimensional picture that's painted by its pundits. Well, universities have detractors too, and sometimes they're no better informed than the people who would have us believe that Ottawa is "fat city". Those of us in the university are certainly not averse to criticism; in fact, it's something we believe that we're pretty accomplished at ourselves and that we encourage in our students. But we object to being the target of the ill informed, to be portrayed as something we're not, and to being judged on the basis of a value system that is narrowly focused on the acquisition of wealth.

Let me just touch on three common misperceptions that universities right across the country are having to deal with these days.

First, there is the view that universities are hotbeds of radicalism, alcoholism, and sexism. Well, as far as radicalism is concerned, the days of massive student unrest are a distant memory. To a large extent, our universities have fallen heir to the "me first" generation. Our young people are typically very earnest, very hardworking, and sometimes even humourless. They are primarily concerned with doing well in university and preparing themselves for a job. They aren't out to buck the establishment -- they want very much to be part of it. I'm concerned, in fact, that there isn't <u>enough</u> criticism on our campuses. The ills of this world have not disappeared and, traditionally, we've looked to our young people in university to point them out to us. University students are changing the political map of eastern Europe and one day they may succeed in doing the same in China. But here at home, our own students are too busy mapping out their career paths to be much concerned about social ills. So, if you're looking for radicalism, you aren't likely to find it on your neighbourhood campus.

What about alcoholism? Yes, it's a problem; but it's certainly not unique to universities. In fact, thanks to responsible student leadership, a lot is being done to curb alcohol abuse on our campuses -- especially here in Ontario. At Carleton, our Students' Association is sponsoring alcohol awareness programs. Our students have instituted training

programs for employees who work at on-campus liquor outlets, they're helping to support peer counselling, and in May they will be joining the administration in hiring a co-ordinator to oversee alcohol education programs and policy development -- this will be a first for any university in the province. Our students are aware of the problem and they're taking steps to do something about it. And all the while they've shown tremendous maturity in dealing with aggressive vendors whose questionable marketing practices are at best socially irresponsible and at times illegal.

As for sexism, it too is a problem that we share with the rest of society and one that is only recently getting the public attention it deserves. Here again, I think it's wrong to characterize universities as centres of sexism. Rather, they are public institutions that have identified it as a problem and that are taking steps to address it. We're making efforts, for example, to ensure that women have equal opportunities to compete for senior administrative positions and, in this regard, Carleton has reason to be pleased with the fact that two of our five Deans now are women; and I'm delighted that Pauline Jewett has accepted appointment as our new Chancellor. Academically, we have an Institute of Women's Studies through which we offer an honours program in that field, we share with the University of Ottawa one of the five federally-supported Chairs in Women's Studies across

the country (ours is currently occupied by The Honourable Monique Bégin), and our Students' Association operates a Women's Centre. Administratively, we're instituting an employment equity program, we've developed an enlightened policy on sexual harassment, and we have a full-time Co-ordinator for the Status of Women who reports directly to me. I wonder how many companies in the private sector can say the same.

A second misperception has to do with quality. We're being told that the quality of what we do is declining -- that the value of a university degree is not what it used to be and that our standards have dropped. There <u>is</u> a real danger of this happening as a result of ever-increasing demands combined with inadequate and diminishing support. Numbers help to tell the story: university enrolments have jumped by nearly 40 per cent over the last decade while our per-student financial support has actually <u>declined</u> by more than 10 per cent in real terms over the same period. So despite our growth, a rising number of applicants are finding no room left in the programs of their choice. I can tell you that there is no pleasure in playing the role of gatekeeper -- determining who gets in and who doesn't, particularly when personal futures and fortunes are at stake.

Universities have made some remarkable adjustments in order to respond to the increasing number of qualified people --

the youthful and the not so young -- who want to learn at the university level. We've developed new instructional techniques in order to accommodate larger classes, and we're using distance education technologies such as television and remote learning centres to reach out to people whom we either cannot accommodate on campus or whose personal circumstances prevent them from coming to campus. Not so very long ago, university students were typically young, white, able males from families with upper-level incomes, studying full time on campus. Today, there is no typical university student. We have made special efforts to accommodate the particular needs of women, mature students, ethnic minorities, the geographically remote, the disabled, and the economically disadvantaged. Have our standards declined because these people are now a part of the university mainstream? No. On the contrary, we have had to get better in order for them to feel at home with us.

And yet, despite our best efforts to meet the needs, the vast majority of our programs are now closed to many students who have the desire and the ability to enrol in them. We cannot guarantee that your sons and daughters or your grandchildren will be able to enrol in the programs of their choice -- even if they have the backgrounds they need to succeed in those programs. This is not a situation that we're happy with, but I'm afraid that it's not likely to change until we find the resources we

need to meet the demands that are being placed on us. The fact that just about every university in the country is in the business of fund-raising these days should tell you that we're serious about finding those resources wherever we can.

In the meantime, though, there are all kinds of indications that the students we do accept and who are able to get into the programs of their choice are every bit as good as those who came before them. They're accounting well for themselves in national and international competitions and I think we have every right to be proud of them. A few weeks ago, for example, you may have read about a pair of Carleton students who won first place in the Inter-Collegiate Business Competition that was held recently at Queen's University in Kingston. The students were given just five hours to develop a business plan for an ailing used-car dealership. I wonder how long it took Lee Iacoca to solve Chrysler's problems? And in January, members of the Carleton Debating Society took part in an international debating competition in Kiev; the head of our team placed as the top female debater there.

Back in September a student in our industrial design program placed second in an international cartoon competition -- beating out all but one of the 772 artists from 50 countries. Last August a student in our architecture program placed first in

an international design competition that had a field of more than 1,200 competitors from across North America.

At this year's International Auto Show in Ottawa's Congress Centre, some of our engineering students were displaying a vehicle that they'll be entering in the Shell Fuelathon which will be held at Shell Canada's test track in Oakville this May; the vehicle is powered by a model aircraft engine the size of an apple and gets something in excess of 360 miles per gallon. And in February, a second-year student in our journalism program spent 12 days in Japan for having placed first in an essay-writing contest that was sponsored by the Japanese tourist board.

There's no question that these students are superior and the fact that they are able to develop exceptional skills, and to compete successfully with the best worldwide, tells me that the doom-sayers who claim that our programs are sub-standard are themselves poorly informed.

The final misperception that I want to talk about today has to do with our responsiveness to this country's needs for economic growth and international competitiveness. You will hear from some quarters, for example, that we're not doing all that we can or should in terms of responding to the requirements of business for highly skilled personnel.

Let's look at this charge in practical terms. To design a university program, recruit and retain faculty to teach in it, and move a group of students through it to completion takes at least six or seven years. Are we confident that we can predict what Canada's specific employment needs are going to be six or seven years from now? Is it fair to prepare people with highly specialized skills that they may not be able to use upon graduation or that may become redundant soon after? Should we shift resources, for example, out of the humanities and into the technologies because of anticipated employment needs, when it is apparent that a growing proportion of our students would prefer to study in the humanities? Do the dramatic advances we're witnessing in technology somehow diminish the value of Shakespeare? Or psychology? Or music?

My own view is that the university has a responsibility to provide its students with whatever current information exists on projected employment needs, to ensure that all of its teaching is informed by the latest advances in knowledge and technology, to require that its students experience a sufficiently liberal education that will enable them to go on learning after graduation, and then to closely attend in its programming decisions to how students vote with their feet. With the possible exception of certain aspects of professional faculties, universities should not be expected to be job-training

institutions -- except through post-graduate, non-credit, continuing education programs which they provide in a highly-focused, intensive way in co-operation with employing organizations or professional associations.

Perhaps this is an appropriate time to say a few words about what universities stand for, because I think it's important that we understand that the university's value system is somewhat different from that of business. First and foremost, universities believe that people have the right to seek truth, to pursue knowledge in all fields and to share that knowledge with others, to challenge questionable social conventions, and to do so without threat of censorship or political constraint.

That's why academic freedom and tenure -- which is not unconditional job security, I might add -- are and must always be part of <u>our</u> corporate culture. Over their 800-year history, universities have developed a system of peer review which has proven to be a pretty effective means of dealing with charlatans. We require that our faculty members conduct research and publish their findings for others to examine. This appraisal process is something akin to the ordeal that the Biblical Daniel went through in the lions' den. Academics have fangs and they take a certain amount of relish in sharpening them on colleagues they

perceive to be dull-witted or intellectually lazy or dishonest. It's not always a pretty sight, but it works.

I realize that there is something like this in the private sector. But the corporate world has different, quantitative measures of value -- like utility, market share, or profit. You can't use that kind of standard when you're dealing with ideas or knowledge, because you can't always judge what is or what may become useful. What's more important to the university is whether or not it is truthful.

I believe that there is a good deal of common ground between business and the university and while I don't think we can ever adopt business culture holus bolus and still be universities, when we look at the record it seems most unfair to conclude that we've been truly unresponsive to the needs of corporate Canada.

On the contrary, the knowledge that our faculty members gain from their research is not only taken into the classroom, but it's increasingly being carried to decision makers in business, industry, and government as well. Carleton, for example, has a commercial development office that facilitates the transfer of university technology to the private sector and seeks out commercial applications for university discoveries.

Our Science Technology Centre has teamed up with government research labs to produce a portable banknote reader, like a talking wallet you put paper money into, that helps the visually impaired to identify what denomination of bills they have in their hands. The Centre has recently worked with a local engineering company to develop a state-of-the-art manufacturing process for ship propellers and other sculptured surfaces. Not only does it produce a propeller that's more efficient and less expensive than ever before, but the propellers are so quiet that they can't be detected by conventional sonar. There's a lot of interest in that technology from our navy -- or what's left of it.

Furthermore, we've recently established an Asian-Pacific Research and Resource Centre to help provide policy makers and business people with information about changing conditions in the Asian Pacific community and the impact these changes might have on Canada's involvement with that region. A similar centre has been set up to monitor the dramatic changes that are taking place in the Soviet Union and to assess how those changes are likely to affect relations between our two countries.

Members of our Mathematics and Statistics Department take part in joint research activities with their colleagues at the University of Ottawa and researchers in Health and Welfare

Canada; Statistics Canada; Energy, Mines and Resources; and other federal agencies. And they provide significant benefits through applied research to the National Capital Commission. In fact, there are no fewer than 66 organized research units across the Carleton campus -- groups of scholars who are studying everything from transportation systems to medical physics, from the management of technology to international trade and investment policy. We're no longer simply a collection of departments and faculties whose main job is to teach recent high school graduates. There are whole new sets of arrangements being developed to bring together research expertise from numerous disciplines so that we can directly address contemporary problems and concerns. And more often than not, these research units are engaged in activities that are likely to have bottom-line benefits to Canadian business; indeed, business people frequently participate in their work.

I guess my bottom line is that, over the new decade and into the next century, Canadian universities will derive much of their success from this growing sense of entrepreneurship. We aren't likely to discard our basic value system, nor should we. But we are likely to go on being innovative, changing with the times, and developing fresh ways of tackling new challenges by exploiting our own resources and linking up with other estates in society. You're likely to see a lot more multidisciplinary

research institutes, and technology transfer, and development agencies; and it's probable that you're going to find us using these in the same way that entrepreneurs would in order to tap new sources of support.

I think we can look forward to an exciting time ahead. Much of what is good in our society got its start in our universities. There is no reason to think that is going to change. We have an important leadership role to play in our communities, our country, and the world; and I believe we're up to the challenge.

Well, that's all the time that I have - and anyway, if I haven't convinced you by now that today's universities in Canada are not out of touch, I'll never be able to do it. At the very least, I hope I have corrected some misperceptions that some people hold of what universities are all about. I think it's important that we go on talking to one another like this and getting to know one another better - because when all is said and done, we need each other. Thank you for letting me have my say.